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PRIMITIVE POETRY AND THE BALLAD.¹

I.

THE middle way in theories of the beginnings of poetry, of the origin of ballads, may be a way of pleasantness, but it is not a path of peace. Whoever chooses to walk in it will need from time to time refreshment of his courage by taking to heart such robust consolation as Goethe offers in the forty-ninth of the Venetian epigrams. From the right come voices which bid one accept poetry as children take sugar-plums, with the eyes fast shut. Poetry, says a pious and parochial critic in the *Nation*, is sacred, transcendental, "as incapable of analysis as that human soul of which it is the highest expression": a kind of codified hysteresis is his way of dealing with the case. On the other hand, if one ventures to construct for primitive times a poetic process which differs from the modern way of composition, sharp rebuke comes from the left, from the rationalists, who accuse one of illicit traffic with a mystery and of worshiping an impossible "folk-soul." Indeed, Professor Brandl² not only charges the present writer with such an amiable heresy, but even credits him with representing American opinion upon this point—*furchtbare gunst dem knaben!* That pentecostal jest which Scherer made has not been sufficiently appreciated, it seems, by the languid sense of humor prevalent on this side of the Atlantic, and we are still in the toils of Jacob Grimm. But Professor Brandl is mistaken. Belief in miraculous and folk-made verse is dead and buried; and I, for one, object to any report of it as even nosed in the lobby of a theory which drives neither miracle nor common sense to an extreme. This theory holds the middle way. To base the investigation of poetry, which is a distinctly social art³

¹ See the new edition of SIR WALTER SCOTT'S *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, edited by J. F. HENDERSON, 4 vols., 1902; Blackwood, Edinburgh, and imported by C. Scribner's Sons, New York.

² Zur Kritik der englischen Volksballaden, in the *Festgabe für Richard Heinzel*, Weimar, 1898, pp. 54 f. May I suggest that Professor Brandl sows seeds of distrust in his ballad-criticism when he emends that familiar *bot and* of "Johnnie Cock" into *bot[h] and*?

³ GUYAU, *Problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine*, p. 71.

and presents definite material for study, upon sociological as well as literary facts, to take account of economic conditions when dealing with an institution which has progressed with progressing culture, is a process which no more does away with ultimate mysteries of the human soul, whence poetry springs, than the study of biology does away with the ultimate mystery of life itself; while the assumption of communal and choral origins is sundered by the world's width from mere refuge in the miraculous.

Almost every modern writer in anthropology, ethnology, sociology—frontier lines are blurred on even the latest maps—grants a radical difference between primitive and civilized societies. Now, as poetry is a social art, it must differ in the two epochs, so far as it is social, in proportion as these two states of society differ. Taine's main thesis still stands: the making of poetry is conditioned by the character and environment of the makers. To this one must add the result of Hennequin's critical studies: the character and environment of the consumer should be taken into strict account. What, now, is this difference between primitive and civilized man? For my own part, I have seen nothing better than the formula of Alfred Vierkandt,¹ as set forth in his long but interesting study of the evidence. Despite a few apparent contradictions, which concern the tendency to exaggerate such a contrast between uncivilized, primitive man,² or even semi-civilized, barbarous man,³ and his modern representative, this difference, as Vierkandt points out, may be measured in times of culture by the increased importance and voluntary, rational activity of the individual. Here, however, occurs one of those cheerful inconsistencies which baffle the defender of communal beginnings in poetry. All hands are willing to accept a formula of individual importance in terms of progress, and they taunt him who proposes it, as if it were a commonplace; they concede even the decline of communal influences; and yet, when one undertakes to retrace the path of progress, to confront and approach the qualities opposed to individual importance, and to

¹ *Naturvölker und Kulturvölker*, Leipzig, 1896; see p. 171, and all of chap. iii.

² BÜCHER, *Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft*², 1898, Der Urzustand.

³ SEECK, *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt*, Vol. I, p. 204 (Die Germanen), and *Anhang*, Vol. I, pp. 521 f.

make, in this instance, some fairly obvious inferences with regard to prehistoric verse, there is a cry of protest as against a new and fantastic theory. Here is simply the old Darwinian trouble in a field which folk still think sacred and secure against any invasion of science. To tell a man, or mankind itself, about huge strides of progress, is to flatter and please; to use this progress for inference about beginnings is altogether odious. In short, the proposition of individual growth is accepted, and the proposition of communal waning is tolerated; but the moment one begins with a "conversely," one meets a protest for which I can see no source outside of prejudice or misunderstanding. To overcome such prejudice, such misunderstanding, I can but appeal once more to the evidence of facts. True, when protest comes from hysterical persons who will not have poetry looked in the face, and who cling to a sort of Westminster catechism about genius¹ and the bard, there is nothing to be said, nothing even to be felt. Not *odi* but *arceo* is the verb for gentry of this sort. But the protest comes from scholars as well, and is referred to the facts in the case. What are the facts, then, which shall serve as evidence for or against the theory of prevailingly communal origins?

The facts are found not only in ethnology, but in folklore, and in what is called popular literature: that is to say, in songs and chorals of savage or barbarous tribes, as representative in some degree of primitive songs and chorals; in songs and chorals of labor, harvest, dance, as a survival of social poetry at large; and in the half literary ballads of Europe, as a link between poetry old and poetry new. To this material, under proper sifting and valuation, nobody objects save in the case of the ballads. Yet it is clear that if the ballads be admitted as evidence, their value is beyond price. Unlike the songs of savages, unlike the rude chorals of labor and the festal year, this ballad makes in some degree the modern appeal to lovers of good poetry; it attaches to conditions of incipient art, and yet holds in survival certain elements which make the communal appeal and go back to conditions

¹ Not once, says M. BRUNETIÈRE, *Revue des deux mondes*, 1898, p. 884, not once, but ten times he has declared "that genius itself, if we really knew what it is that we call by this name, is often nothing more than a wide and more effective participation in all that constitutes the common treasure of humanity."

of primitive life. In short, such controversy as one meets in the attempt to establish communal beginnings for poetry, is sure to touch the difficult question of ballad beginnings; approval of the theory as a whole carries with it a belief in the dual origin of popular verse. My present concern is to reckon not with the approval¹ but with the hostile criticism; and this hostile criticism, as expressed by Professor Brandl in Germany, by Mr. Henderson in England, deals mainly with theories of the ballad. There is, however, one objection to the larger question, from a source entitled to all possible respect, which must be answered before the ballad is approached. Moreover, if this answer is in any way convincing, it will serve materially in defence of the related theory.

In a review² which approves the main thesis of my *Beginnings of Poetry*—the fundamental difference between primitive and civilized verse—Professor Grosse, nevertheless, maintains that I have made the primitive individual far too much of a *herdenthier*, and that I have made the primitive community far more homogeneous than it really was. Now, as I said above, when one declares that poetry grows more and more individual as it progresses, no objection is raised; but when one makes the simple inference that to retrace this path of individual progress is to come closer to communal origins, to see the individual wither, then there is a storm of protest. Even Professor Grosse joins, however courteously, in this irrational opposition. It is a perilous undertaking to call in question any statements about primitive life which are made by the author of *Die Anfänge der Kunst*; I am fain to think, however, not only that Professor Grosse's concession largely neutralizes his objection, but also that his doctrine of primitive individualism is at variance with the facts. To say that early man was a *herdenthier*, that early society was homogeneous, is a statement redeemed from the opposition of certain evidence on which Professor Grosse rests his case, as soon as one confines the statement to its proper range, to the actually social

¹For examples of this approval, see the *Quarterly Review* for July, 1898, on English and Scottish Ballads, and a review in the *Athenæum*, February 22, 1902, of the writer's *Beginnings of Poetry*.

²*Deutsche Literaturzeitung*, April 26, 1902, pp. 1084 ff.

part of primitive life. The individual amounted to little or nothing *when taken in terms of social organization*; and since it was only under conditions of social organization that poetry began, it is fair to say that in earliest poetry the individual counted for little or nothing compared with communal influences. One can grant this while conceding at the same time that primitive man was in some respects distinctly more individual, more wilful, capricious, unreasonable, insubordinate, than civilized man. So, too, civilized communities show, in certain phases, far greater coherence, more communal unity, than was ever reached by any primitive horde. This, however, is a voluntary coherence of thinking persons, not mere consent of kind with instinct at its strongest and reason at its lowest. Surely Vierkandt makes it clear that so far as intelligent and voluntary, not instinctive, manifestations of the individual are concerned, primitive man, like modern savages, showed the lowest grade of individuality; while—and here Professor Bücher's hints are of great value—the incipient, social impulses necessarily involved such an entire subordination of the individual to the mass as is impossible under the rational conditions of modern life. Savages accept in an unreasoning way the most irrational practices prescribed by the custom of the tribe. True, for a wilful, capricious, often solitary person—savages still eat alone, like dogs—the curve of individualism in primitive man runs high; for a thinking, planning member of society, his line hardly leaves the level. To be a social person at all, he merged his incipient powers of thinking, planning, persevering, in the social consent of common deed and common expression. Now it is clear that, however long the period of transition,¹ this primitive, solitary man came to a point when he was compelled to be a social person. Sooner or later, the struggle for existence forced social unity upon him as alternative to extinction. Such unity or rather coherence was at first, to borrow a formula from logic, of the greatest possible extension and the smallest possible intension; rhythmic consent, for example, brought about emotional but not rational community,² an absolute

¹ Probably one of the "eternized problems." See BÜCHER, *Der Urzustand*, cited above, and KEASBEY, *International Monthly*, April, 1900.

² YEJO HIRN, *The Origins of Art*, pp. 88 f.

coherence in step, voice, feeling, but not that subordination of purposeful and intelligent minds to the interests of a commonwealth which makes democracy at its best. Yet even the beginnings of social consent held the seeds of this higher democracy, and in the first emotional community lay something of the spirit which rises to its noblest expression in the thought and act of Regulus, as idealized by Horace in his incomparable climax. Despite savage selfishness and stupidity on the individual side, some of the foundations for a state of the Periclean sort were laid in primitive emotional consent; and here, too, is the beginning of poetry, with the same consent of emotion, or sympathy, for its inner life, and with rhythmic consent of step and voice for its external sign. That poetry in this earliest stage served as vehicle for solitary and intellectualized emotion is as little to be assumed as the idea of intellectual and isolated patriotism.

But one clings to the individual poet. The poem, we are told, is his work; and his art, "*artium regina* . . . had her original from heaven, received thence from the Hebrews," and is not to be considered more curiously. Well, we love Ben; but that tidy formula of Heaven, Jewry, Greeks, Latins, and so to "all nations that professed civility," is no longer to be taken seriously as the track of poetic evolution. We now look narrowly at nations that professed and profess incivility; and in all the evidence which they afford for the case in point, but one fact can be adduced as proof for the doctrine that the poet preceded poetry. Leaning on the tale, the *märchen*, one propounds the entertainment theory, and puts into the foreground of the poetic process a maker of pleasure face to face with the throng, a primitive lyceum, with its primitive platform-man drawing alternate laughter and tears. Scherer takes this ground in his *Poetik*. The prose *märchen*, he says, is the start of all epic, making somewhere and somehow its perilous leap into rhythm by a process not yet indicated by patrons of the theory. Argument by definition, such inference from "invention" to a prime "inventor" runs counter to the sober facts of ethnology, sociology, and literature itself. Candid examination of these facts, and a study of the *märchen* in all its ways, refuse to give it equal date of origin with choral

song, not to speak of precedence. It was not a possible art, this communication between an entertainer and his public, until the public was an organized existence; and overwhelming evidence compels the assumption of choral song, rhythmic consent, emotional community, as prominent factors in the very creation of such a public. The individual made himself felt in primitive verse; but his activity began with the choral throng. Despite certain protests at the term as a scientific affectation, I think the fissiparous birth¹ of individual singing and poetry from choral singing and poetry to be an assumption based on evidence of facts. Such tendencies as are shown by this act belong to the development of poetry toward its present phase of solitary author and solitary reader; the individual traits, on which Professor Grosse insists, are of the elementary kind, are unsocial and of the original human stock, not only undisciplined by communal beginnings, but really hostile to any exercise of the poetic art. From communal poetry to individual poetry is a steady advance. Yet within this steady advance, taken as a whole and viewed in the course of ages, one must assume constant action and reaction of communal and individual elements as the pulse of poetic life. Even in such a definite and comparatively recent phenomenon as English literature, in its fourteen centuries of existence, one can detect a constant shifting from communal to individual domination, from individual to communal, as one epoch succeeds another. True, the whole course of literature has been to throw the individual poet into an increasingly strong relief; but under various disguises the communal impulse always manages to assert itself afresh, whether as convention, popularity, tradition, uniformity, and however fallen from its old estate of acknowledged and sovereign rule. The poet still appeals to that consent of emotion from which the earliest poetry sprang direct, and he still keeps time with that consent of emotional expression, rhythm of step and voice, in which his art began. These are the constant, the human elements of poetry. But the conditions of poetic expression differ as social conditions differ. That primitive poetic expression was prevalingly communal, seems, I think, a plain

¹ *Beginnings of Poetry*, p. 393.

inference from facts; and it differed to that extent from the individualized and intellectualized expression of today. I do not for a moment maintain that individual impulses did not assert themselves in earliest song; without them there can be no poetry at all; but what I urge is the great predominance of homogeneous and choral elements and the subordination of individual impulses. Professor Grosse says that I have "showed the fact, and given a reason for it, that social poetry in low stages of culture has a decided superiority over individual poetry," and I have proved "that the conditions, and hence the nature, of oldest poetry differ materially from poetry of later times." This is a handsome concession. And I venture to hope that the considerations just urged, along with others already set forth,¹ will convince him that the claim for a homogeneous condition of primitive verse-makers is not the unreasonable claim which he was inclined to call it.

Professor Grosse leans heavily on ethnological evidence in this case. The best book which has appeared for a long time in ethnological research is the account of Australian natives compiled by Spencer and Gillen.² This rich array of facts, so faithfully recorded, so intelligently used, could be quoted to sustain more than one phase of the general theory which I am trying to defend. It revives some seemingly beaten causes. Even promiscuity, despite Westermarck's conclusions, is restored at least to its belligerent rights; so, perhaps, is matriarchy. However that may be, there is no question that the evidence of this book, so far as it goes, makes for a communal theory of poetic beginnings. The iron tyranny of custom, of social tradition, over individual initiative; the relation of song and dance; the use of epic and dramatic elements—these and many other features of tribal life, recorded by an ethnological expert, point in but one direction. To transcribe the evidence about choral song as used at every stage of savage life and in all the doings of the tribe, would be to quote a good part of the book. Choral singing is everywhere. With constant repetition, with insistent burden,³ chanted now by

¹ *Beginnings of Poetry*, pp. 374-89, 462 f.

² *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, London, 1899.

³ See pp. 184, 191 f.—with specimen—290, 360: "singing for hours 'The sand hills are good.'"

the old men, now by the young men, now by women, now by all the tribe, it yields on occasion to an individual chant, mainly epic, which is clearly the offspring and never the parent of communal song. One may "sing" a weapon or the like; but such a ceremony as "singing the ground" in solemn choral¹ is clearly the older and festal custom. The solitary act, as ceremonial rite, must, in the nature of the case, derive from a public act. The medicine-man may mutter his *carmen*, and the entertainer may sing his epic solo in alternation with the chorus; but tribal incantation and choral singing are not only the prevalent fashion but are beyond all doubt the original social fact. Indeed, even recitation, on which some theorists lay such stress as precedent to singing, seems to be a negligible quantity with Australian natives of the primitive sort. A recent writer² says of their songs that "in some cases the words seemed designed to run in rhymes; but a decided rhythm recurring in lines of regular length, *and invariably chanted, never recited*, is the essential character of Australian poetry." He adds, too, that "almost every black fellow is a 'maker' of lyric verse," thus placing the development of the art in that stage of fissiparous birth from choral singing, where progress, that is, the making of other than traditional and ritual songs, is passing into the control of individual singers, but is not yet the monopoly of a few; and where 'poetry is still an integral part of public life and the most prominent feature in social tradition.

I can see, therefore, no misuse of ethnological evidence in thus taking the acknowledged formula of increased individual importance as something which implies the converse of the main proposition. In a second paper I shall essay a similar course with two qualities of modern poetry which are often associated in the formula of progress. The increase of sentiment and refinement, the energizing of poetic imagination, are among our commonplaces of criticism; but to retrace the path, to confront opposites, to deal in that wicked "conversely," is in some eyes to be of the heretics, if not to court critical inquisition and the

¹ See p. 293.

² JOHN MATTHEW, *Eaglehawk and Crow* (London and New York), 1900, p. 140.

stake. Perhaps, however, this prejudice may yield in the face of adequate consideration. Finally, by such a backward view at the qualities which sentiment has displaced, by such an attempt at a formula for the change from old objective force to new imaginative power, I hope to gain a comparatively untried point of view for a look at the controversy about ballad origins.

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